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# Panama situation tense, worrisome

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PANAMA CITY — While American attention is riveted a few hundred miles to the north on the war in Nicaragua, Panama may be quietly lurching toward an equally serious situation, some politicians and political analysts here say.

"I tell you, we are preparing the soil here for the same problems they have in El Salvador and Nicaragua," opposition Assemblyman Guillermo Cochez said yesterday.

"People are losing their faith. What are they going to do? They are going to go to the mountains soon."

Mr. Cochez, as a member of the minority Christian Democratic party that has been under bitter and, recently, violent attack by the government, might be accused of having an ax to grind. But the strikes, corruption and violent political crimes that have wracked Panama for the last eight months lead more neutral observers to agree with him.

"Panama is the most worrisome political situation in the hemisphere," an American intelligence source said recently. "There seems to be a lot of trouble ahead here," added a knowledgeable foreign political analyst here.

Trouble here would quickly mean trouble in the United States. Thousands of tons of American shipping a day traverse the narrow, 50-mile long Panama Canal that connects the Pacific and Atlantic oceans.

Under a pair of 1977 treaties, the United States gradually is turning over control of the canal to Panama. But the process won't be complete until 1999, and some American conservatives, such as North Carolina Republican Sen. Jesse Helms, who opposed the treaties all along, are arguing that Panama's fractious politics may make it necessary to break the agreements.

"I don't know what Mr. Helms' motives are, but the Panamanians have certainly made it easy for him," said one observer this week. He was

referring to a wave of political violence and repression that began last September when a leading critic of the military was murdered after he claimed to have evidence linking

strongman Gen. Manuel Antonio Noriega to drug trafficking and gun running.

Gen. Noriega is the latest in a series of military men who have run Panama since a 1968 coup. Although the country is nominally a constitutional democracy, civilian rule is a fiction little-honored even here. Panama has had five presidents in the last 46 months. The military periodically trades them in like used cars. The last one to resign, Nicolas Ardito Barletta, was forced out last September after he promised to investigate the murder of Dr. Hugo Spadafora.

Dr. Spadafora was a former vice minister of health who, after he announced that he had evidence linking Gen. Noriega to illicit drug and arms dealings and was returning from Costa Rica to prove it, was seized from a bus by Panamanian soldiers. His body — castrated and decapitated — was found a few days later across the border in Costa Rica, stuffed in a U.S. Mail sack.

No one has been charged with the murder. But witnesses said the men who seized Dr. Spadafora were wearing Panamanian military uniforms. As they dragged him away, Dr.

Spadafora shouted: "These men are G-2!" G-2 is the military's intelligence section. The section was headed by Gen. Noriega for 12 years before he became commander-in-chief and generally is considered to be his strongest base of support in the military.

Whoever murdered Dr. Spadafora carved the message "F-8" into his back. Since then, the same slogan has been cut into the body of an opposition Christian Democratic politician who was kidnapped and beaten. It was mysteriously painted on the official aircraft of former President Barletta the day before Gen. Noriega demanded his resignation.

Most observers believe "F-8" stands for "Force 8." A goon squad led by a Panamanian lieutenant that called itself "Force 7" harassed opposition politicians and electoral officials during the 1984 elections.

The Spadafora murder was only the first of a series of violent and repressive acts against opposition figures here. One Christian Democrat was kidnapped and beaten, and

acid was thrown in the face of another. A newspaper columnist who wrote that the military was involved in the Spadafora murder was jailed, and a radio reporter who criticized Gen. Noriega was summarily kicked off the air and fined heavily.

Nonetheless, the accusations against Gen. Noriega continue to multiply. The opposition newspaper La Prensa has charged that the general's regime has stolen more than

\$200 million in U.S. aid. Public suspicion of the general got another recent boost when a close friend of his — a known arms smuggler named Cesar Rodriguez — was murdered in Colombia when he apparently was arranging a drug deal that went bad. Murdered along with Mr. Rodriguez was the son of Gen. Noriega's predecessor as commander in chief.

The accusations of corruption and violence have been coupled with a stagnating economy. Panama's per capita foreign debt is among the highest in Latin America, and a crippling series of strikes shut down virtually every industry in the country before they ended in rioting and looting last March.

The accumulation of problems has left many Panamanians glum and depressed. "This is like living inside the Mafia," observed one attorney here this week.

Some Panamanians blame the United States for not putting more pressure on Gen. Noriega.

"I don't want an intervention by the United States because I'm not that kind of person," said Mr. Cochez. "But I don't understand how your country can apply such a double standard. Your State Department accuses [Thomas] Borge in Nicaragua of dealing in drugs, but they ignore much more evidence of that happening here. They call for democracy in Nicaragua, but they ignore what happens here."

Mr. Cochez yesterday was even more annoyed with the military than usual. After he reported the com-

plaints of some villagers that the police chief in their town was running a burglary ring, his own home and office were burglarized within 48 hours.

The United States has expressed some displeasure with the regime. One aid package was slashed from \$50 million to less than \$6 million, and military assistance was cut from \$10 million last year to \$3.8 million this year. State Department outspokenness about the Spadafora

murder has angered Panamanian officials so much that they have begun to complain that there is an international conspiracy to destabilize their government.

In a recent television address, the current president, Eric Arturo Delvalle, said that Panama's enemies are creating "a climate of confusion . . . . Turn a deaf ear to the lies of the merchants of hate." On the same telecast a group of young military officers claimed all the accusations are "aimed at attempting to prevent Panama from recovering its main national resource [the canal] in 1999." They expressed their support for Gen. Noriega.

U.S. officials concede Gen. Noriega's cooperation with respect to the America military. There are 10 U.S. bases here, including the headquarters of the Southern Command.

One observer said that the Panamanian tendency to blame the United States for Gen. Noriega is symptomatic of a reluctance to confront problems that may mean, in the end, there will be no uprising.